

Challenges for social work and welfare education in the 21st century: A contextual analysis

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Abstract: *The social work and welfare profession has experienced change and challenge from a number of sources in the late 20th century. In Western countries, changing government ideology and policy about welfare provision has fundamentally altered the landscape in which social and welfare workers are employed. The role and purpose of the social welfare profession has been interrogated, with a resulting perceived 'crisis' for the profession. Government policies have also affected the provision of education for students, and this, too, has had an impact on the shape and structure of courses, and the work of academics. In addition, broader changes in society have also created a challenging environment, for example, there is a general distrust of professionals together with the speaking out by marginalised groups about their place and treatment within society and by professional groups such as social welfare. Such a context affects the profession, and recruitment of students. Within this milieu, social work and welfare education must equip graduates to work effectively in a changing and sometimes hostile world. This paper broadly examines the context effecting provision of education for social work and education in the 21st century. These issues are similar across Western countries, and effect many other professional groups.*

Keywords: *social work, welfare, education*

Introduction

In this paper, I will use the term 'social welfare profession' to encapsulate both social work and welfare unless it is imperative to distinguish between them. While many argue that they are different professions, such demarcations are often contrived and do not stand up to scrutiny as "there is little difference between the tasks undertaken by social workers and those performed by welfare workers in the workplace, and any distinction there was has largely broken down with the deregulation of the labour market and the consequent declassification of social work positions" (Barber & Cooper, 1997, p.120).

It has been recognised that current education for the social welfare profession has been influenced by broader societal, economic and political changes which affect the conceptualisation and public expectation of the profession and the role and structure of institutions which provide the courses. The way social welfare as a profession in Western countries, should respond to changing expectations and a changed and changing social context is strongly debated by scholars in the USA, Britain, Canada and Australia. The future shape of the social welfare profession is a key discussion in much of the literature (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2002; Allan, Pease & Briskman, 2003; Cameron, 2004; Cree, 2002; Fook,

Ryan & Hawkins, 2000; Healy, 2000; Hugman, 2001; Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2001; Mullaly, 2002; Napier & Fook, 2000; Napier & George, 2001; Noble, 2004) as fundamental structures of the 'welfare state' have changed.

It is more realistic to participate in continuing debates about the future of social work than invest in the fallacy that structures and organisations which sustain it will continue forever. However, irrespective of how the personal social services are labelled, and how their staff are designated, social work will not disappear (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2002, p.xvii, xix).

In turn, these debates about the purpose of the social welfare profession, and its future role in the light of massive social and political change, influence recruitment, retention and education of students.

Social work and welfare education in Australia: a brief background

The two professional bodies relevant to social work and welfare education in Australia are the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW). Each of these organisations has established policy and procedures related to education of professionals to enable membership of their organisation (AASW, 2000; AIWCW, 2001). These organisations define the profession, approve, accredit and review courses and so set the agenda for the curriculum.

The AASW has established the expectations for entry-level practitioners and the type and length of program: courses must be at Degree level. They have also determined that the only type of organisation which can offer the course is a university recognised by the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee. The AASW has decided the overall structure of recognised programs, including the content, and the role and scope of field education. It has policies regarding articulation and recognition of prior learning, and a comprehensive process for review of courses (AASW, 2000). It also has set practice standards for social workers (AASW, 2003). Twenty-two social work courses are currently accredited in Australia. Similarly, though less well articulated, the AIWCW has policies and procedures about membership eligibility, course structure and review, and identified core competencies (AIWCW, 2001; AIWCW, 2002). AIWCW approves courses that are Degree level and Diploma/Advanced Diploma awards. These courses may be offered through University, TAFE or by approved private providers. There are many courses across Australia, with over twenty in Victoria alone. In general terms, the goals of both professional bodies in regard to professional education are similar.

The goal of professional education is to provide a rigorous program that results in graduates who are competent, effective, skilled, knowledge-based, ethically aware and confident practitioners. They will have a commitment to social justice and social change in the interests of the citizens of their society, recognising that there are competing views of desirable approaches to the organisation of society and the provision of social services. They will have the ability to think critically and reflectively about their practice, and a commitment to intervene in the interests of the client groups they serve (AASW, 2000, p.5).

The professional expectations and the contextual factors influencing the social welfare profession and the preparation of graduates for work within this industry are similar across many Western countries.

Key contextual factors influencing social work and welfare education

Social work and welfare services work in increasingly diverse societies. Changing demographics, changing expectations of the role of professionals, and the advent of the information explosion has contributed to

a changing social landscape. There are many challenges in preparing graduates for social welfare work, in this increasingly complex, complicated and uncertain world is difficult (Barnett, 2004).

Many of the structural verities of the modernist twentieth century have dissolved. While educators may reproduce students' practice knowledge they found effective, students must also be able to learn to practice in transformed settings. Students are going to act in settings not yet imagined. How are they going to do that? (Crawford, 2001, p. 14).

A major change has already occurred to the settings in which Australian social welfare work is provided. As Federal and State governments directly or indirectly fund most welfare positions, and indeed post-secondary and tertiary education, there is a direct relationship between the ideology of governments, service provision and education. The social and public policies promulgated by governments have a direct impact on the provision of social welfare services, the profession and therefore the education of its members. These effects are experienced in both the government and non government sectors, as non government (voluntary) agencies become increasingly reliant on government funding to provide services (Napier & George, 2001). Similarly to Britain, the USA and Canada, with the economic reform agenda in Australia in the past decade or so, there has been a fundamental shift in the ambit and scope of government responsibilities in the provision of welfare services (Harris & McDonald, 2000; Hough & Briskman, 2003; Hugman, 2001; Lymberry, 2004; Mullaly, 2001; Napier & George, 2001; O'Connor, 1999). These changes include a strong emphasis on economic efficiency, self-reliance, and mutual obligation. Current government approaches to the welfare state have led to the use of business or market principles to welfare provision. The Federal government has also introduced increasingly targeted benefits, which are exclusive and strictly means-tested, and work to reduce access to public funds and reduce 'dependency'. Increasingly, there are expectations on individuals and families to provide for themselves, and there is a strongly held belief that reduction on public spending is a positive achievement. "The outstanding feature of the post-welfare state is the policy and practice of converting the political nature of social problems into the problems of individuals" (Jamrozik, 2001, p.271).

These changes have fundamentally altered the way social welfare services are delivered. Competitive tendering for welfare funding has reduced cooperation between agencies. The professional advocacy role and the role of social work and welfare staff and human services organisations in challenging discrimination or oppressive practices have diminished (Auditor General Western Australia, 2000; Harris & McDonald, 2000; Healy, 1998). Managerialism and the proliferation of managed care and case management roles have led to decreased professional autonomy (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000). This agenda has had a clear impact on social welfare workers and their roles.

There is also an increased cynicism about professionals, and professional expertise affecting many of the traditional professions. The popular media has also contributed to the undermining of the social welfare profession, particularly in relation to the reporting of child abuse. Social work in particular is singled out from other professions, such as teachers, judges, nurses and others, and soundly criticised in the media where "headlines have described social workers variously as naïve, incompetent, indecisive, too trusting, and easily manipulated do-gooders who lack adequate professional training and standards" (Mendes, 2001, p.30). Mendes (1997; 2001) further argues that such comments endorse the ideology of 'New Right' governments and reinforce negativity about the welfare state. It also serves to reinforce negative assumptions about professionals providing welfare services, such as that they are well-paid, self-serving, and/or unprofessional, incompetent or inappropriately trained. In Australia, as elsewhere, there has also been a strong criticism by marginalised groups of the role and behaviour of professional groups in maintaining and reinforcing their disadvantage: As marginalised and oppressed groups in society have become more vocal, they have criticised the past (and present) implementation of social welfare practices which further stigmatise and marginalise their members. They have strongly argued for

the social welfare profession to return to its core values and work for social reform to reduce and remove oppression (Dominelli, 2002; Hough & Briskman, 2003). They have also called for their concerns to be addressed in the curriculum.

In response, the social welfare curriculum has struggled to find a place for all voices, often resulting in a fractured curriculum with an attempt to have units on the issues affecting various groups for example working with people with disability; indigenous peoples, migrants, gay and lesbian people, rural practice and international social work. Combined with the various practice methods, casework, family counselling, group work, organisational work, social policy, social action and community development, the result has been a crowded and often unintegrated curriculum. Many courses have struggled to find a way to integrate these factors, and utilised theoretical orientations such as critical theories, empowerment and anti-oppressive approaches and carefully, with great debate, and sometimes reluctantly, changed their curriculum to try to address these competing demands (Napier & George, 2001).

Other broader challenges affect the provision of social welfare education. Changes to government policies have also led to massive changes to the post-secondary education sector in Australia and elsewhere. Similar ideologies to those described in the provision of welfare services have been applied to the education sector, and governmental policies have fundamentally changed the tertiary landscape with the introduction of student fees, reduction in eligibility for student benefits (which reinforce family obligation and students' dependency on family for financing their education) and the demand that post-secondary institutions be more financially self-supporting and less reliant on government funding. These policies have support increasing privatisation, with the expectation that Universities must attract additional funding through research funding and commercial opportunities to support their programs, and the commodification of education through the development of fee-paying courses and the recruitment of international students both on-shore and off-shore (Napier & George, 2001).

Not unexpectedly, these policies encourage competition between universities for students and funding, and the conceptualisation of the tertiary sector as a market place. Competition between post-secondary institutions and within the institutions themselves has created stressful and difficult working environments for academics. For social work and welfare educators, and as a professional group, this has been very problematic as there has been competition rather than co-operation between schools as they compete against each other for market share, and develop financial initiatives to support their existence. Even within a single university, social work and welfare courses have often needed to struggle to maintain their existence and relevance as they are measured against other university courses which are more profitable, can attract larger research grants, or have higher 'status' (Napier & George, 2001). In the TAFE sector, similar changes have occurred, with expectations of commercialisation of programs, and the concern expressed that advanced standing or credit, based on work experience and competency, may weaken academic programs.

The application of market principles to education has resulted in changes to the way students (consumers) are managed as teaching is evaluated on its cost effectiveness as well as other measures. There has been an attempt to reduce teaching delivery costs by using large scale lecturing, use of IT, large tutorials, assessment tools which can be quickly marked (often by computer) and other economies of scale which are often not suitable for professional education (Napier & George, 2001). There have been threats to the fieldwork components of courses, which have been a major part of a student's professional education and where theory, research and practice are melded. These threats have included reduction of funding for this component and higher staff/student ratios. Field agencies, struggling with their own changed role and environment, are finding it harder to provide the voluntary supervision required to support the student practicum. The fieldwork practicum, and fieldwork teachers are often devalued both as fieldwork is costly and time consuming to provide, and as it is seen to have little research or academic value.

(Rhoides, Ward, Ligon & Priddy, 1999). Staff are increasingly pressured to meet the many expectations of the profession, the university, employers and students, and Napier & George (2001) describe the current Australian environment in higher education for social work as being like a battlefield.

As many major employers regard social work graduates “presently being seriously under-prepared for the jobs they will be offered” (High, 2001, p.8) social work and welfare educators have endeavoured to find ways to manage to imbue their graduates with the theory, knowledge and skills, as well as the values of the profession, in this difficult and frequently hostile, educational setting.

Overall, these broader contextual changes have created a perceived crisis in social welfare although some authors have also seen this as an opportunity to transform social welfare practice (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2002; Allan, Pease & Briskman, 2003; Cree, 2002; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000; Healy, 2000; Hugman, 2001; Lymberry & Butler, 2004; Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2002; Napier & Fook, 2000). While there has been a long-term debate about the nature and purpose of the profession and the compromises it makes in its employment in the welfare state, these concerns are greatly exacerbated in the present climate. Many scholars and practitioners have attempted to provide a way forward for the profession. There has been the development of new theoretical orientations which support social welfare profession's enduring and core value base and provide models of critical and anti-oppressive practice. Post-modernism, though it appeared to initially provide some answers is contested. Pugh (1997) describes the ‘lure’ of post-modernism in his article examining the effects of these challenges on social work education in Britain.. He highlights the problems inherent in post-modernism, including its inconsistencies and the major difficulty in adopting its amoralistic and apolitical stance in a profession such as social welfare, which, after all, is clearly part of a political enterprise about human rights and social justice. Social work scholars have reconsidered overarching theories but it is important to note that many of these approaches are contested. Pugh (1997) embraces a role where social welfare professionals can offer counter views of the ways ‘problems’ are socially and politically constructed.

As social work academics and practitioners we should acknowledge that our own location is problematic both for users of our services and for our political ‘masters’. We are inevitably and intrinsically compromised by this, but we are not powerless, nor need we be socially impotent. We should reject the pessimistic implications of post-modernism and accept that one of our tasks is to attempt to establish alternative accounts of the ‘problems’ we encounter, and thus seek to establish these as dominant discourses within the profession and within the wider decision-making for a of society (Pugh, 1997, p.107).

While social welfare scholars argue for the necessity of teaching students how to analyse theory and reiterate the essential commitments to valuing the individual, defending notions of human dignity and rights and introducing students to social justice and anti-oppressive practice, there is uncertainty as to how best to implement this in practice and within a constrained educational environment. Social welfare as a profession seems to be battling on several fronts: a change to the industry with changed government ideology, a difficult and sometimes hostile social environment, a competitive, commodified education sector where social welfare struggles for its place, an environment for academics in which various competing demands exist, and differences in student recruitment and student expectations. There has always been a tension between the educational institutions and the pressures of accreditation or approval by the professional bodies but in a constrained financial environment this pressure has been exacerbated. It is important to recognise the complexity of the new ‘landscape’ and work to create new frameworks for professional education: this is the challenge for the 21st Century.

Conclusion

Social work and welfare practice is struggling with how best to move forward into the future. The nature of the profession, its role and responsibilities, its values and theoretical frameworks has been considered to be under threat by many of the key social work theorists. Social work scholars variously discuss a crisis, a challenge and/or the need to transform social work as a profession. There are risks associated with the choices it must make. It could reinforce its traditional specialities and maintain strict boundaries and control which would confirm its 'separateness' from others and help legitimise it as a particular profession. Or it could become less concerned with professional boundaries, become more flexible with its entry requirements and educational expectations, which would assist in widening its base but reduce its status as a specific profession. As a response to these many pressures, education for social work and welfare has received some attention. There are case examples of how to teach particular approaches, or fields of practice, and manage fieldwork, and these examples have helped in practical terms for academics teaching in similar courses. However the broader, theoretical basis for the profession is still contested. It is vital for the profession to decide its future, address its status and importance within the post-secondary sector, and articulate the value of teaching in ways which develop students' capacities to work in difficult and changing environments and with complex social and personal problems. The future will involve rigorous examination and reflection about the future of social welfare as a profession, and articulation of teaching frameworks which support it, in the changed and changing environment, and rethinking of existing assumptions and frameworks for practice.

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